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AUTHOR Barker, Bruce O.; Muse, Ivan D.
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ABSTRACT

Ten innovative rural school programs are briefly described. Included are North Dakota's Mott School District #6 (316 students), which cooperates in a Multi-District Vocational Mobile Program bringing vocational education opportunities to isolated, rural students; Washington's Liberty School District (180 secondary students), where supervised correspondence courses have expanded curricular offerings to over 100 elective courses; and Iowa's CAL Community School District (241 students), which uses volunteers for adult continuing education and prekindergarten classes. Also described are Mount Ayr Community Schools (Iowa), where parents use "report cards" to indicate perceptions of teacher/school performance and problems; Wisconsin's Spring Valley School District (784 students), where vocational education classes in dairy cattle management use microcomputers; and South Dakota's Rutland School District (150 students), where modified block scheduling allows secondary students more study time and teachers more instructional time. Additional programs are New York's Sacketts Harbor Central School District (525 students), which offers secondary students a locally-oriented environmental safety course; Minnesota's Eagle Bend School District (378 students), with its own television station; Texas' Sabinal Independent School District (600 students), where students produce their own yearbook and the high school newspaper consistently wins state merit awards; and Kansas' Lorraine Unified School District (540 students), whose annual Seniors Honor Dinner honors outstanding seniors and their parents. (MH)

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by

Dr. Bruce O. Barker
Division of Continuing Education

Dr. Ivan D. Muse
College of Education

Brigham Young University
Provo, Utah 84602

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A Report of Innovative Rural School Programs in the United States

by

Bruce O. Barker and Ivan D. Muse

Introduction

One of the most common criticisms directed toward rural schools is that these schools are unable to provide learning opportunities equal to those available to students attending larger schools. It is true that constraints in human and financial resources often limit the availability of instructional materials and educational programs for students in small/rural schools more than those who attend larger metropolitan schools. It is also true that when small schools attempt to mimic larger schools in organizing their curricula, the result is often an array of course offerings with limited scope and overall ineffectiveness. Rural school administrators and teachers do face many challenges which are shared by their counterparts in larger schools. Chief among these is the challenge to provide meaningful learning opportunities for students. Although common to both small and large schools, the magnitude of this challenge is generally greater in small schools than in large ones. The challenge for small school educators, however, is not to "carbon copy" programs and policies of larger schools, rather to optimize those characteristics and strengths which are inherent in small schools. Many outstanding and innovative practices do exist among small/rural schools in this country. Many more could be implemented.

During the past 18 months, the authors have contacted public school superintendents in over 640 rural school districts across 45 different states in an effort to identify exceptional programs and

practices in our nation's rural schools. The purpose of this report is to briefly describe a few of the programs reported to the researchers.

School Programs

Among those of special interest included Mott School District #6 (316 students) in North Dakota. The district reported cooperative use with six other districts of a Multi-District Vocational Mobile Program which has brought vocational education opportunities to students living in isolated rural settings. Mobile classrooms (travel trailers) moved each semester to a different district and provided high school students the opportunity of studying welding, carpentry, nursing, or institutional food services. The programs were exploratory in nature and were offered only to juniors and seniors. Instructors traveled with trailer units, bringing programs to students rather than extensive busing of students to programs.

Liberty School District in Spangle, Washington reported that curricular offerings for their 180 secondary students had expanded from less than 15 elective courses to over 100 through the use of supervised correspondence study courses. The district allowed high school students to enroll in one or two correspondence courses each semester and financed the tuition costs for them. Students participating in correspondence study attended a "correspondence class" supervised by a member of the high school faculty who monitored students' work, maintained records of students' progress, provided assistance or tutoring when able, and proctored exams sent from bonafide correspondence schools. It was reported that many students developed interests in careers they would not otherwise have studied.

CAL Community School District, a small progressive district in Iowa with only 241 students reported that volunteer help from parents and senior citizens in the community has enabled over 150 adults to participate in adult continuing education classes offered at the district's one school in the evenings. The district also offered a pre-kindergarten class for three and four year olds, operated by volunteers in the community. Over 90 percent of eligible three and four year olds have participated in the program. The district also reported the use of Apple II computers for instructional purposes beginning at grade one and continuing through grade 12. In addition, the district has a gifted and talented program for students in grades K through 8. Selected students received individualized attention three hours per week in the language arts, social studies, sciences, and mathematics.

Mount Ayr Community Schools, another district in Iowa (732 students) has developed a "report card" for use by parents to report their perception of teacher/school performance and for any problems they may see in the school. The "report card" asked parents to rate how well teachers listened to their children, provided individualized attention to their children, maintained classroom discipline, and provided opportunities for gifted and talented youngsters. Parents were also asked their feelings about the school's lunch program, bus system, curricular offerings, and overall job effectiveness of school administrative personnel.

Spring Valley School District in Wisconsin (784 students) described a vocational education class in dairy cattle management that emphasized practical application of microcomputers to help in record

keeping, balancing dairy rations, determining feed rotation, etc. The class was also open to area farmers who wished to utilize the benefits of microcomputers in helping manage their dairy operations.

Rutland School District in South Dakota (150 students) reported the use of a modified block scheduling system which has provided secondary students more study time and permitted teachers more instructional time. For the past two years, the district's high school has operated on a schedule in which the first and last periods of the day are traditional 50 minute periods, but the three in between are 100 minutes each, interspersed with a 40 minute lunch period. The superintendent reported that students, overall, have spent more time on task and that teachers, particularly in classes requiring laboratory experience, have been able to provide more indepth instruction.

Eagle Bend School District in Minnesota, a small district with only 378 students reported that it has its own television station, and described it as ". . . probably the world's smallest television station." The network, operated by the school, is reported as the only one of its kind in the United States. In the fall of 1980, the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) allowed the station to go on the air. Creation of the station is an experiment in low-power community broadcasting. The station's broadcasting signal can be picked up by any regular TV set within a 30 mile radius. Broadcasts are aired during selected hours of the school day to two neighboring communities with a combined population of just over 1100 people. Under the direction of a trained teacher, students learn to operate the equipment and plan and format the station's programs. Programming

includes stories about local people and events (sports, parades, seasonal activities, etc.) The school also plans to produce mini-documentaries that deal with local history and occupations. In addition, school personnel hope to broadcast the school's French and physics classes to a neighboring district which does not offer these courses in its curriculum.

Sacketts Harbor Central School District in New York state (525 students) reported that it offered an environmental safety course for its secondary students that was adapted to interests and activities available to students in the local area. Through lectures and field activities, students participated in the following: hunting and fishing safety, big game hunting, trapping, snowmobile recreation, tractor handling, small boat handling, archery, duck hunting, duck identification and bonding, fire arm safety and black power safety, and decoy carving. The course has received strong support from students and community members. It has also been recognized by the Duck's Unlimited organization and the National Rifle Association.

The superintendent of schools for Sabinal Independent School District (600 students) in Texas mailed a copy of the high school year book and several copies of the high school newspaper to the researchers. For 27 consecutive years, the school newspaper has received the states's Award of Distinguished Merit in its division. The school year book or annual, which is about 150 pages in length and includes both black and white and color photography, has been published totally by the school. All phases of production, with the exception of the hard bound cover, are produced by students using school owned facilities.

Lorraine Unified School District in Kansas (540 students) indicated that a "Seniors Honor Dinner" was hosted annually by members of the District Board of Education. Outstanding seniors, who had maintained high scholastic achievement throughout their four years of high school, were honored at the dinner along with their parents. The same district reported that its carpentry class regularly contracted to build small sheds and garages for members of the community. The income received from sale of the buildings provided financing for the continuation of the program.

Many other rural districts from across the nation reported practices and programs to the researchers. These included the use of computers to manage attendance records, payroll records, etc.; programs for gifted and talented learners; computer education programs for both elementary and secondary students; block scheduling of classes; telephone conferencing between schools and specialized subject matter experts; extensive use of volunteers to assist teachers in providing programs which otherwise would not be available; cross grade tutoring; cooperative sharing of education specialists and programs between school districts; career education programs that used local members of the community and others that could occasionally be brought to the school; special reading programs; and foreign student exchange programs.

Conclusion

The small/rural schools in America share many of the problems that beset education in general: inadequate finances, shortage of teachers, changing social values, pressures from special interest groups, etc. The fact is that many of these problems are magnified in

the small school. This is particularly true of the challenge to provide the many and varied educational needs of students as determined by students, parents, the community, the state, and the nation. To think that rural schools cannot successfully meet this challenge is a fallacy.

This report has attempted to briefly outline a few of the innovative practices and programs operating among some of our nation's small/rural schools. Those reported herein are only representative of many others across the country. It is important to note that small/rural school programs can be designed and developed to meet the individual needs of students. The challenge facing administrators, teachers, parents, students, and community members in rural areas is to optimize available resources in order to provide the most meaningful education possible for students.